Corridors As Cultural Landscapes

Selma to Montgomery National Trail

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In July 1990, Congress enacted the Selma to Montgomery National Trail Study Act directing the National Park Service (NPS) to study the route traveled by voting rights activists in 1965 from Selma to Montgomery, AL. The objective of this study is the determination of the route's eligibility for designation as a National Historic Trail. If designated, the Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail will be the first African-American historic trail in the national park system.

As required by the study act, the route has been evaluated under the authority and requirements of the National Trail System Act which provides for national scenic and national historic trails. In 1968, Congress passed the National Trails System Act, designating the Appalachian and Pacific Crest Trails as initial components. The purpose of the Act was to create a national trail system consisting of scenic and recreation components. The Act was amended in 1978 to include national historic trails so that trails of historic and cultural significance might also be preserved.

To qualify as a national historic trail, certain criteria have been established as a means to evaluate potential routes. National historic trails are original routes of national significance in American history; these routes must be identifiable and have a potential for public education or recreation. A determination of the route's eligibility for national historic trail status has now been completed, and the route has been judged to meet all criteria. In addition, the designation of a connecting trail from Marion to Selma is recommended to characterize the significant role played by area residents. The Selma to Montgomery route is not eligible for national scenic trail status since it is less than 100 miles in length.

Historic Background

The American civil rights movement as it relates to African Americans has traditionally been identified with the protest activities of the 1950s and 1960s. Recent generations most commonly associate it with protest marches led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the boycotts and sit-in activities by African Americans and whites in the Deep South. The movement's origin is frequently associated with the landmark Supreme Court case, *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), which declared racial segregation in public education unconstitutional. Although such events were significant, the civil rights movement was not spontaneous. Decades of activity prior to the Brown decision set the stage for the momentous events of the 1950s and 1960s, and are a significant part of the civil rights movement. After years of legal maneuvering, the marches, sit-ins, and rallies were able to focus the nation's attention on the plight of African Americans, and several landmark federal laws were the result.

The Selma to Montgomery march was only one protest, but it stands out because of its purpose—voting rights. Full citizenship and voting rights had been long denied to minorities in the United States, and the quest for political rights was an obvious progression after the desegregation of public accommodations in 1964. Through widespread media coverage, the Congress, the President, and the American people saw the determination and strength of the Selma protesters as they endured violence and adversity. Their cause was adopted by many, resulting in a massive march and a rush to enact strong legislation which would guarantee the right to vote for all citizens.

As early as the colonial era, African Americans strove to be recognized as citizens of this nation. Despite the adoption of the Declaration of Independence and a constitution, the fundamental principles of democracy, freedom, and justice did not apply to all Americans. The right to vote, which is a precious privilege in a democratic society, was denied to most Americans including women, Native Americans, freed blacks and slaves. For African Americans, in particular, the struggle to gain voting privileges would last well into the 20th century.

During the early decades of the 1800s, the platform of the civil rights movement emphasized abolition of slavery and the acquisition of citizenship rights for freedmen. Led by activists such as Frederick Douglass and Martin Delaney, African Americans petitioned the federal government and the Supreme Court for citizenship rights. In 1857, this plea fell on deaf ears when the Supreme Court declared in the Dred Scott case that black Americans were not United States citizens. This sentiment coupled with the heated slavery debates instigated a civil war in the nation that eventually led to the destruction of slavery.

At the conclusion of the Civil War, the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments were added to the Constitution which secured blacks liberty, citizenship, and voting privileges respectively. During Reconstruction, blacks were elected to public office on local, state and federal levels. But this progress was temporary as white southerners recaptured political power, and blacks were continuously denied social and economic rights. Thus by the 1900s, African Americans had lost all privileges that had been gained.

In an effort to regain citizenship rights, civil rights organizations such as the Niagara Movement and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), were established to attack the legal system in hope of acquiring political and social rights for African Americans. But after using this method for nearly 50 years, courtroom battles were not enough. Consequently, the need for immediate and direct change prompted many black Americans to use different methods, including mass demonstrations, sit-ins, and boycotts. Mass demonstrations proved to be forceful and effective when the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) used non-violent resistance to desegregate public facilities during the early

Beginning in May 1991, historical research was conducted using primary and secondary sources, and an oral history project was initiated to obtain further information on the 1965 Selma to Montgomery march. Meetings with public and government officials were also used to identify significant sites and events as well as possible ways to commemorate the famous march. Public meetings were held in Selma, Hayneville, Marion, and Montgomery. A public information brochure to introduce the study was distributed in August 1991, and other interested parties had been informed of the study's progress.

The proposed trail has received strong support as indicated by the attendance at public meetings and the number of written comments received. Comments have included support for the trail in general as well as specific suggestions for museums, commemorative activities, and ideas for relating the Selma to Montgomery march to other civil rights activities.

Based on the study's research and public involvement, four implementation alternatives for the proposed Selma to Montgomery Trail have been prepared. These alternatives include:

Alternative A: Authorize a national historic trail along public roadways with interpretive center in Selma or Montgomery;

Alternative B: Authorize a national historic trail as conventional trail paralleling the actual route;

Alternative C: Authorize a national historic trail along public roadways and provide technical assistance to facilitate non-federal management;

Alternative D: No federal action.

A final study report with recommendations, alternatives based on study findings, public comments, determinations, and cost estimates has been submitted to the Congress. Only the Congress is authorized to designate the Selma to Montgomery route as a national historic trail. In the event designation occurs, a comprehensive management plan for the new trail will be developed in cooperation with state and local governments as well as private citizens and organizations.

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1940s. By the 1950s and 1960s, other civil rights groups such as the Southern Conference Leadership Conference (SCLC) used this method to force federal, state and local governments to reconsider their views on civil rights. All of these organizations focused their agendas on securing voting rights as the best method of gaining civil liberties for African Americans.

Although the federal government guaranteed voting rights to African Americans through civil rights legislation, many were still denied access to the political process. Voting discrimination continued in the South as blacks were subjected to violence, economic retaliation, literacy tests, and poll taxes. In 1964, civil rights groups joined forces to form the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) to educate blacks about their citizenship and register them to vote. As a result of their efforts, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) was formed to challenge the all- white Democratic Party of Mississippi. Even though the MFDP failed to win official recognition, it gave African Americans in Mississippi the opportunity to participate in the political process.

While black voters were struggling for representation in Mississippi, a similar struggle was going on in Dallas County, AL, and its county seat, Selma. On three separate occasions in March of 1965 protesters attempted to march from Selma to Montgomery, to highlight the discriminatory practices which prevented African Americans from voting in the Deep South. As federal judicial proceedings failed to produce changes in the registration process, African-American leaders, including SNCC and SCLC, united in a direct action campaign focused at the heart of the Black Belt—Selma, AL.

After a series of protests in Selma and the death of Jimmie Lee Jackson in nearby Perry County, African-American leaders came upon the idea of marching from Selma to the state capital in Montgomery to formally protest continued voter discrimination. On Sunday, March 7, 1965, the first march set out from Brown Chapel A.M.E. Church toward Montgomery, but when the marchers reached the Edmund Pettus Bridge, they were brutally attacked by law enforcement officers. Known as Bloody Sunday, the attack of the civil rights workers in Selma was seen by millions of people through the comprehensive media coverage accorded to the campaign. Although a second march to Montgomery was peacefully turned around at the same bridge, a third attempt beginning March 21 successfully reached Montgomery after a five-day trek under the watchful eye of federalized national guardsmen. As the protesters marched toward the state capital, a platform had been erected for civil rights leader, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who later urged the audience to continue their struggle against racism, segregation, violence and poverty.

Shortly after the rally, protesters dispersed and returned home. One civil worker, Viola Liuzzo, a white homemaker from Detroit, MI, volunteered to shuttle marchers back to Selma. On a return trip to Montgomery, Liuzzo and black civil rights activist, Leroy Moton, were attacked on Highway 80 by four Ku Klux Klan members from Birmingham. Mrs. Liuzzo was shot and killed while driving, and Moton was able to escape unharmed. The senseless murder was investigated by the FBI, and the perpetrators were arrested and tried for their actions. After escaping a local conviction, the Klansmen were convicted on federal charges by the U.S. Department of Justice.

In August 1965, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Federal officials poured into the South to register African Americans who had been denied access to the ballot. As a result of the Selma movement, political life in the South was forever changed, and voting rights are now the privilege of all citizens, regardless of race, creed, or color. The Selma to Montgomery march is remembered as a symbol for all Americans representing the power of the ballot and its meaning in our democracy.